

VZCZCXRO0387
OO RUEHDBU
DE RUEHDBU #0416/01 0961136
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O R 061136Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0201
INFO RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0367
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0039
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0069
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0042
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000416

SIPDIS

STATE DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 4/6/2019

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT SMOTHERS COVERAGE OF RELIGION LAW

REF: A. (A) 2009 DUSHANBE 347
[1](#)B. (B) 2009 DUSHANBE 406
[1](#)C. (C) 2008 DUSHANBE 1409

CLASSIFIED BY: TRACY A. JACOBSON, AMBASSADOR, EXE, DOS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Government of Tajikistan continues to use smoke and mirrors in discussing its religious policy. Government officials deflected criticism of the new religion law (reftel A) at a March 30 press round table without providing any substantive basis for their comments. The government has pressured Tajik media outlets into simply not reporting on the law. This public relations strategy belies reality. A well-placed analyst said the government was pushing the religious community toward conflict in the long term. Nevertheless, as the international community continues to criticize the new law, the government reasserts its commitment to following its restrictive religious policy. End summary.

WE RESPECT RELIGION BECAUSE WE SAY SO

[1](#)2. (U) On March 30, the Government of Tajikistan held a round table on the religion law for members of the local and international press. Representatives of international organizations were not invited. The BBC reported that the event featured three officials who are responsible for formulating and implementing the government's religious policy: Saidmurod Fattoev, President Rahmon's advisor on social affairs; Mirzoshohrukh Asrori, the Minister of Culture; and Murodali Davlatov, the head of President Rahmon's Islamic Studies Center. They each painted a very positive picture of the law, rejecting criticism without providing any substantive basis to support their arguments.

[1](#)3. (U) Asrori accused the independent media of presenting a distorted view of the law and "misguiding the public." Fattoev referred to the March 20 statement by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom criticizing the law as "intervention in Tajikistan's internal affairs." He refuted the Commission's analysis by saying the new law "respects different religions" and guarantees that the government would not intervene in religious practice. Davlatov accused the independent media of supporting the "alien ideas" of international organizations.

14. (C) Just after the round table, Abduqahor Davlatov, the Editor in Chief of the independent weekly Najot told Embassy staff that most of the reporters at the meeting reacted negatively to the officials' attempts to paint a happy picture. He corroborated the BBC accounts of the editor in chief from the weekly Millat newspaper calling the government "religiously uninformed," and expressing frustration at officials who merely made assertions without explanations. Fattoev told journalists that they would see the positive consequences of the law in future, adding, "we cannot give you all of our information right now; we are doing this for the security of our nation."

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM

15. (SBU) Despite the reporters' criticisms on March 30, few of Tajikistan's major news outlets reported on the law in the news cycle following the round table. Those newspapers that did report on the law generally supported the government's position. The Millat editor who criticized the government on March 30 published a story entitled "The Two Lies of the BBC," explaining that the BBC had misquoted her. The Islamic Party's newspaper provided the only significant negative coverage of the law.

16. (SBU) The Government of Tajikistan also has used its public relations strategy to address criticism from the international community. In response to "deep regrets" about the law from the European Union and United States, Tajikistan's OSCE Ambassador issued a statement at the April 2 OSCE Permanent Council meeting in Vienna. The Ambassador

DUSHANBE 00000416 002 OF 002

asserted that the new law was necessary to "consolidate civil society, address current challenges and combat religious radicalism and nihilism." He said the law guaranteed religious communities' rights to select their leadership and conduct worship, despite the fact that the law explicitly restricts these rights. He claimed the government is "making efforts to deal respectfully" with religious minorities such as the Jehovah's Witnesses (which the government banned), and he said Christian missionaries are "functioning freely" (the government has deported foreigners it suspected of proselytizing). He posited the recent donation of a synagogue to the Jewish Community as an example of the government's respect for minority religious groups, an act we had anticipated in reftel B. The synagogue was donated by a businessman (President Rahmon's brother in law), not by the Government of Tajikistan.

CHARTING A DANGEROUS PATH

17. (C) The government's public relations campaign has thus far prevented a public discussion of the potential consequences of the law. On March 31, Abdullo Rahnamo, a well-placed expert on religion and politics at the Center for Strategic Research told us that in passing the law, the government had lost the chance to pull back from its ill-advised and unrealistic religious policy. Implementation of the law would continue to strengthen the position of those traditional Islamic leaders whom the government did not control, and hasten the government's loss of credibility in the religious community (reftel C). He doubted the government would be able to control the selection and training of imams as outlined in the law.

18. (C) Rahnamo said an immediate negative reaction was unlikely,

but the government had charted a path of future conflict with the religious community. Much of the country's population did not know about the law; as the government implemented its provisions, however, people - especially young people - would become more and more disenchanted. Tajiks are not as naive as the government thinks; they can see through the government's talking points. The hundreds or thousands of Tajiks who studied in Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran would recognize the law as a restriction of their abilities to express their religious beliefs.

19. (C) Comment: The government has a two-pronged public relations strategy on the religion law. For its domestic population, officials repeat catch phrases about respecting religious freedom; the government also enforces dress codes to emphasize that Tajikistan is a secular society. It is clear that the government has either directly or indirectly pressured media outlets to avoid discussion of the law in Tajikistan. As for the Millat editor's denial of the BBC report, she has a reputation for being patriotic, and she may have been swayed by Fattoev's "security of our nation" comment. Or, she could have been threatened outright. For the international community, the government says that it respects religious diversity, but that it must also fight extremism. This strategy belies reality: the government is disconnected from religious life, and its policy is ill-suited to ensuring stability. Criticism of the new law - especially from the international community - has not given the government pause to reassess the situation; government officials have instead dug in their heels, committing themselves to staying the course and insisting to the public and to the international community that they know what they are doing. End comment.
JACOBSON